

A NOTE ON THE INSCRIPTION IN THE APSE OF OLD ST. PETER'S

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“In absida,” inside the apse of Old St. Peter’s, the compilers of the early syllogai, beginning with the Einsidlensis, read the tetrastichon:

IUSTITIAE SEDIS FIDEI DOMUS AULA
PUDORIS
HAEC EST QUAM CERNIS PIETAS QUAM
POSSIDET OMNIS
QUAE PATRIS ET FILII VIRTUTIBUS INCLYTA
GAUDET
AUCTOREMQUE SUUM GENITORIS LAUDIBUS
AEQUAT.¹

The interpretation of the text has given rise to a good deal of controversy. Even the syntax is involved, but it has been unraveled by J. Ruyschaert: “Haec quam cernis quam omnis pietas possidet quae inclyta gaudet virtutibus patris et filii et aequat auctorem suum laudibus genitoris est sedis iustitiae, domus fidei, aula pudoris.”² The initial *haec* and the repeated relative clauses starting with *quae* and *quam* all refer to a subject *feminini generis*, which is connoted by the triple paraphrase *iustitiae sedis fidei domus aula pudoris*. A few key words in the inscription want explaining: *pietas* can only mean mercy, the mercy of God; *omnis* in the context means undivided; *possidere* I would translate as inhabit; and *auctor*, which could mean creator, builder, or founder, in this case might as well mean donor.³ *Pudor*, finally, as we shall see, connotes four or five concepts—shame, chastity, shyness, the *pudenda*, or awe⁴—and several of these

may be intimated by the term as used in the inscription. Transposed into English prose as literally and hence as crudely as possible, the lines would then read:

“This which you see and which Mercy undivided inhabits is the Seat of Justice, the House of Faith, the Hall of Chastity (Awe), which delights in the virtues of the father and son and equals its donor with the praise of his sire.”

The father and son of the third line of the inscription, as well as the *genitor* and the *auctor* of the fourth line, have been customarily identified with Constantine and one of his sons; and the whole text interpreted so as to mean that Constantine began, was the *auctor*, while the son completed the construction of *haec quam cernis*, the basilica, the *domus fidei*, the *aula pudoris*.⁵ This interpretation, though, runs into difficulties: the *auctor* in the inscription is obviously not the father, the *genitor* to whose praise he is equaled, but the son. On the other hand, no son of Constantine, however vain-glorious, could have claimed to be the founder of St. Peter’s: the inscription on the triumphal arch,

QUOD DUCE TE MUNDUS RESURGIT IN
ASTRA TRIUMPHANS
HANC CONSTANTINUS VICTOR TIBI
CONDIDIT AULAM,⁶

if nothing else, would have given him the lie. In fact, in 1967 the *communis opinio* was countered by Ruyschaert, who proposed to see in the father and son of the inscription the Father and Son of the Trinity.

In the *Corpus* in 1976 I accepted that trinitarian interpretation; and since, in that case, the inscription was chronologically set adrift, I dated it 324

¹ICUR, II.1, 21.10 and passim.

²J. Ruyschaert, “L’inscription apsidale de S. Pierre . . . ,” *RendPontAcc* 40 (1967–68), 171 ff.

³ThLL, II, 1205.

⁴For the meaning awe for *pudor*, see E. Forcellini, *Totius latinitatis lexicon*, III (Padua, 1771), 608 f (*reverentia*); C. Balli, *Dizionario piemontese italiano, latino e francese* (Carmagnola, 1830), II, 252 (*vericundia*); K. E. Georges, *Lateinisch-deutsches Handwörterbuch* (Leipzig, 1880), II, 1845 f (*Ehrfurcht* referring to Ter: “Pudor divum”).

⁵ICUR, II.1, 346 f, note to 345.2; ILCV, no. 1753.

⁶ICUR, II.1, 20.6 and passim; ILCV, no. 1752.

or after.⁷ This I withdraw and propose to revert to the old identification of the father and son with Constantine and one of his three sons surviving him. Which of them remains to be seen, but whoever he was, the terminus post of the inscription is 22 May 337, when Constantine died. Among the sons, Constantine II, who never ruled over Italy, can be eliminated. That leaves Constans, who held Rome precariously from 337, when he was fourteen, till 340, and firmly from then until his death in 350; and Constantius, who ruled the West (as well as the East) from 352 to 3 November 361, when he died. G. B. De Rossi and Margherita Guarducci have linked the tetrastichon inside the apse to the fragmentary inscription HOSTILI INCURSIONE on its arch, which they believe to refer to Constans' victory in 342 over the Franks.⁸ Hence they have identified Constans with the son mentioned in the inscription. However, I see no reason for claiming this linkage.⁹ The inscription inside the apse, in my opinion, was composed for Constantius and hence between 352 and 361. He is the *auctor* of *haec quam cernis* and hence equaled to the father, the builder of the basilica.

Indeed, both Ruysschaert and Miss Guarducci have, correctly I think, linked the inscription, rather than to the completion of construction at St. Peter's, to the replacement by a figural mosaic of the original aniconic decoration of the apse vault *ex trimma auri* donated by Constantine.¹⁰ The theme of that figural mosaic was in all likelihood, as has been shown in a debate extending from the 1930s to this day,¹¹ the *traditio legis*: Christ,

his right arm raised in the emperor's gesture in *allocutio* scenes, stands on or floats over a mount whence spring the rivers of Paradise; he is flanked by Peter and Paul and hands to Peter a scroll inscribed *Dominus legem dat*, while Paul stands by, his hand raised in the customary gesture of acclamation. At their feet a frieze of lambs moves toward the center; possibly also, at St. Peter's, in a lower band of the apse vault, the twelve apostles separated by palm trees flanked the empty throne with the Lamb of Revelation underneath. Whether or not that first figural apse mosaic at St. Peter's survived until replaced around 1200 by that of Innocent III (which then disappeared in 1506), and whether that medieval mosaic incorporated into its composition a number of motives from its Early Christian predecessor, may be left open in our context. We may also leave open whether the *traditio legis* at St. Peter's was a first statement of the theme or whether it was preceded by the mosaic in the left-hand conch of S. Costanza. Whatever the answer, the apse mosaic at St. Peter's was post-Constantinian: Ruysschaert, to whom, one recalls, the *Pater* and *Filius* of the inscription were the persons of the Trinity and hence timeless, proposed a date of around 370; Caecilia Davis-Weyer, based on the spread of the theme from the sixties on, has suggested the last years of Pope Liberius, hence between 358, when he was reinstated in the Roman See, and his death in 366. That timespan can be slightly moved back to between 352 and 361 if, as I think, the *filius* of the inscription was Constantius.

Indeed, only that mosaic can be the *haec quam cernis* of the inscription whereby *haec* may refer to an implied *camera* or *imago* or *historia*; or also to a term summing up the ultimate meaning of the *traditio legis*. That meaning, I propose, is encoded in the three paraphrases in the first line: *iustitiae sedis, fidei domus, aula pudoris*. *Iustitiae sedis* in that precise wording does not occur, to my knowledge, in biblical or patristic writings. However, it is frequently implied in the vision of God sitting in judgment, as in Rev. 4:2 f or Dan. 7:9 f, the latter commented on by Ambrose: "Christ is Justice (1 Cor. 1:30) and seated He judges."¹² His seat specifically is referred to *pars pro toto* in Ps. 88:15: "Iustitia et iudicium praeparatio sedis tuae"; and Ps. 96:2: "Iustitia et

⁷R. Krautheimer et al., *Corpus basilicarum christianarum Romae* (Vatican City-Rome-New York, 1937-77) (hereafter *Corpus*), V, 172, 274.

⁸*ICUR*, II.1, 346 f, note to 345.2; J. H. Jongkees, *Studies on Old St. Peter's* (Groningen, 1966), 29 f, referring it to Constans; R. Egger, "Das Goldkreuz am Grabe Petri," *AnzWien* 22 (Vienna, 1959), 198, to Constans or Constantius; likewise C. Pietri, *Roma christiana* (Rome, 1976), I, 56 f.

⁹I believe the fragmentary inscription on the apse arch to refer to Constantine's victory in winter 322/23 over the Sarmatians. See my forthcoming paper, "The Building Inscriptions at Old St. Peter's."

¹⁰*Liber Pontificalis*, ed. L. Duchesne (Paris, 1886), I, 176; also *Corpus*, V, 171, 272; and M. Guarducci, "Camerae fulgentes," in *Letterature comparate . . . in onore di Ettore Paratore* (Bologna, 1981), 799 ff.

¹¹J. Kollwitz, "Christus als Lehrer und die Gesetzesübergabe," *RQ* 44 (1935), 45 ff; T. Buddensieg, "Le coffret d'ivoire de Pola," *CahArch* 10 (1959), 157 ff; C. Davis-Weyer, "Das Traditio Legisbild und seine Nachfolge," *MünchJb*, ser. 3, 12 (1961), 7 ff; and Ruysschaert, "Inscription," with somewhat divergent reconstruction; also W. N. Schumacher, "Dominus Legem Dat," *RQ* 54 (1959), 1 ff and idem, "Eine Römische Apsiskomposition," *ibid.*, 137 ff. M. Sotomayor, "Über die Herkunft der Traditio Legis," *ibid.*, 56 (1961), 215 ff, doubts the presence of the

theme in the apse of St. Peter's. Idem, *S. Pedro en la iconografía paleocristiana* (Granada, 1962), 120, gives a list of the surviving examples of the composition.

¹²Ep. 63.4 (PL 16, col. 1241): "Christus (est) iustitia et sedens iudicat."

iudicium correctio"—or *directio*, this being the variant known to Augustine—"sedis eius." Augustine, in commenting on Ps. 96, provides the key to the meaning of the term Seat of Justice: "... His seat He calls those who have believed in Him. Of them He makes His seat because in them Wisdom (*sapientia*, that is, the Logos), the Son of God has taken His seat ... they have been made just, justified by faith; ... they have been made His seat, He is seated in them. He judges out of them. ..." ¹³ The Seat of Justice then, on which Christ is seated, is the community of the faithful, the Ecclesia, the City of God, as time and again repeated by the fathers: "... Holy Church, that is us, ... the faithful of Christ ... all over the earth from the Rising of the Sun to its setting ..."; ¹⁴ or again: "What is the city of God, but Holy Church? The men who love one another and love their God who dwells in them, they make a City for God ... that city ... is ... the Church ..."; ¹⁵ or to quote Ambrose: "... the community of Holy Church which arises linked and joined in one body through the unity of faith and charity." ¹⁶

Likewise, *fidei domus* seems best decoded as referring to *ecclesia*. Again, as *sedis iustitiae*, the exact wording does not occur, from what I see, in the Bible or in patristic writings. ¹⁷ However, variants on *domus*, in the first place *domus dei*, often abbreviated as simply *domus*, combined with faith or the faithful are legion, as is the equation of *domus* and *ecclesia*: "... Hence the house is the Church: abundance of the house, redundance of grace, torrent of joy of the Holy Spirit," so Ambrose; ¹⁸ or again: "to the pious therefore the Church is their house, Heaven their fatherland. ..." ¹⁹ And again, in this

context too, the faithful themselves are the house, the Ecclesia: "They who live in the house of God are themselves the House of God ..."; ²⁰ and "... all the faithful and the angels make one house of God and one city ... all the faithful which is the house of God ... all together make one house and one city ..."; ²¹ or finally, from *De civitate Dei*: "As a house to the Lord is being built the City of God, which is Holy Church ... from those that believe in God, as from living stones it is being built." ²²

Aula pudoris is the only one of the three terms used in line one of the inscription that I have found in patristic writings in that precise wording. Ambrose uses it to denote the womb of the Virgin: "... Let proceed from His bridal chamber, the royal Hall of chastity (or Awe, *aula pudoris*), the giant of the twin substance. ..." ²³ Given the customary identification of Mary with Ecclesia, *aula pudoris* would also be the womb of Mother Church. One example from many will suffice: "... married, but virgin; for she is the prefiguration (*typus*) of the Church, immaculate though married; as virgin she has conceived us from the Holy Spirit, as virgin she brings us forth without lament. ..." ²⁴ Indeed, when Ambrose makes Juliana, mother of three daughters about to take their vows, say: "... who will not honor the mother of so many virgins? Who will not venerate the womb (*aula pudoris*)?" ²⁵ does he not by implication identify her with Mother Church, Ecclesia?

All three paraphrases in the first line of the inscription then appear to allude to Ecclesia, the Church. At the same time, all refer to the *haec quam cernis*, the mosaic with the *traditio legis* once in the half dome of the apse. That theme, better identi-

¹³ Augustine, *En. in Ps. 96* (PL 37, col. 1940): "Sedem eius dicit qui in eum crediderunt: de ipsis enim sibi facit sedem, quia in eis sedet Sapientia, Filius enim Dei ... Ergo quia isti facti sunt iusti qui in eum crediderunt ... iustificati ex fede facti sunt sedes ipsius, sedet in ipsis iudicans ex ipsis. ..."

¹⁴ Augustine, *Sermo CCXIII*, cap. 7 (PL 38, cols. 1063 f): "... Sancta Ecclesia ... nos sumus ... in toto urbe terrarum a solis ortu usque ad occasum."

¹⁵ Augustine, *En. in Ps. 98* (PL 37, col. 1261): "quae est civitas dei nisi Sancta Ecclesia? Homines enim amantes se invicem et amantes Deum suum qui in illis habitat faciunt civitatem Deo. ..."

¹⁶ Ambrose, *De officio ministrorum*, III, cap. III.9 (PL 16, col. 159): "... Sanctae Ecclesiae congregatio quae in unum conexum corpus atque compactum unitate fidei et caritate."

¹⁷ The term does occur once with the meaning baptism in an inscription, Diehl, *ILCV*, 1838A, from S. Paolo fuori le Mura, but that meaning does not apply in our context.

¹⁸ Ambrose, *En. in Ps. 38* (PL 14 col. 1007 [773]): "... domus ergo Ecclesia est: ubertas domus reduntia gratiarum terrens voluptatis spiritus sancti."

¹⁹ Idem, *En. in Ps. 48 & 18* (ibid., col. 1219 [951]): "... Pii ergo domus est Ecclesia, pii patria coelum est."

²⁰ Augustine, *Sermo CCCXXXVII*, cap. 3 (PL 37, cols. 1477 f): "Qui enim habitant in domo dei ipsi sunt etiam domus dei."

²¹ Idem, *En. in Ps. 126* (PL 37, col. 1668): "... omnes fideles et angeli unam domum dei faciunt et unam divitatem ... omnes autem fideles quae est domus dei ... omnis simul unam domum faciunt et unam civitatem. ..."

²² Idem, *De civitate Dei*, VIII.24 (PL 41, col. 251): "Aedificatur enim domus Domino Civitas Dei quae est sancta Ecclesia in omni terra ... de quibus credentibus in Deum tanquam lapidibus vivis domus aedificatur." See also Rufinus, *in ps. 5* (PL 21, col. 666): "... Domus Dei ipsa est sancta Ecclesia, quae construitur ex fidelibus tanquam ex vivis lapidibus ..."

²³ *Hymn. Ambros. I*, 4.14, as quoted in *ThLL*, II, 1459: "... procedat de thalamo suo, pudoris aula regia, geminae gigas substantiae. ..."

²⁴ Ambrose, *Expos. in Lucam*, II, 7 f (PL 15, col. 1635 [1284]): "... (Maria) bene desponsata sed virgo; quia est Ecclesiae typus, quae est immaculata sed nupta. Concepit nos virgo de Spiritu, parit nos virgo sine gemitu."

²⁵ Idem, *Exhortatio in Virginitatem*, cap. IV (PL 16, col. 359): "quis non honorabit tot virginum matrem? Quis non venerabitur aulam pudoris?"

fied it seems as *dominus legem dat*, but never, to my knowledge, mentioned in patristic writings, has been interpreted variously as carrying different meanings: Christ as basileus in the attitude of the *allocutio*—everyone seems to agree on the imperial overtones of the scene²⁶—handing the Law to Peter and thus establishing the primacy of the Roman See;²⁷ Christ resurrected in Majesty appearing as victor over death to Peter with Paul as witness, all this supported by apocalyptic elements;²⁸ or stressing still further the elements drawn from Revelation, the Second Coming of Christ;²⁹ Christ promulgating the New Law and sending the apostles, Peter foremost, on their mission of salvation.³⁰

As so often in Early Christian and medieval ico-

²⁶ Kollwitz, "Christus als Lehrer"; also A. Grabar, *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin* (Paris, 1932), 200 ff.

²⁷ Davis-Weyer, "Traditio," passim; also Grabar, loc. cit.

²⁸ Schumacher, "Dominus"; Sotomayor, "Traditio Legis."

²⁹ F. Nikolasch, "Zur Deutung der Dominus Legem Dat-szene," *RQ* 64 (1969), 35 ff.

³⁰ Kollwitz, "Christus als Lehrer"; Y. N. J. Congar, *Nouvelle revue théologique de Louvain* 74 (1962), 915 ff; also J. L. Maier, *Le Baptistère de Naples* (Fribourg, 1964), 108 ff.

nography, the theme may well have carried more than one meaning. However, its interpretation as Christ promulgating the New Law seems to me well supported by the allusions in the inscription to Ecclesia, provided my proposal to decode the three paraphrases in the first line is correct. Indeed, what does the promulgation of the New Covenant mean if not the act of instituting the Church? Christ after his Resurrection, Peter and Paul, the founders of the Church on earth, formed from Jews and Christians; Peter receiving the scroll of the Law from the hand of Christ with Paul witnessing and acclaiming; finally, the lambs representing the faithful of whom the Church is built. Does then the *haec quam cernis* of the inscription, rather than to an implied *camera* or *historia*, refer to what is understood by the *traditio legis*—Ecclesia, the Church which inhabited by Mercy rejoices in the virtues of father and son and equals the praise of the donor of the mosaic, Constantius, to that of his sire, Constantine, the builder of St. Peter's?

Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome